Have You Ever Wondered...

In the Zechus of a Refuah Shleima of my Rabbeim, Rav Shmuel Kamenetzky shlita, הגאון הרב שמואל בן איטא עטיל and Rav Moshe Heinemann Shlita, הגאון הרב משה בן פיגלא.

Q: If one finds himself taking care of guests when his סדר לימוד קבוע / regular learning schedule or his only opportunity to daven תפילה בציבור comes up, which takes precedence?

A: The Meiri (*Shabbos* 127a) writes:

לעולם ישתדל אדם בהכנסת אורחים שאין לך מצוה גדולה מזו

Always try to perform *hachnasas orchim*, for there is no *mitzvah* greater than it!

Aside for being מקיים the *mitzvah* of ואהבת לרעך כמוך, to love your fellow as yourself (*Vayikro* 19:18 & Rambam *Hilchos Aveilus* 14:1), *hachnasas orchim* is a way of fulfilling the *mitzvah* of והלכת בדרכיו, emulating Hashem Himself (*Devarim* 13:5, *Sota* 14a).

The שלה הקדוש (*parshas Vayeira*, *Ner Mitzvah*) adds that just as Hashem provides for and sustains the entire world, so too should we emulate His ways by opening our homes and welcoming others.

There are different מאמרי חז״ל that discuss the centrality and great significance of the *mitzvah* of הכנסת אורחים.

The *Baalei Mussar* (see *Ahavas Chessed* 3:2) point out a striking contrast. When the Torah describes Avraham's meticulous observance of all the *mitzvos*, it summarizes his devotion in a single *pasuk*: "Because Avraham obeyed My voice and observed My safeguards, My commandments, My decrees, and My Torahs" (*Bereishis* 26:5). Yet, when describing the *mitzvah* of הכנסת אורחים, the Torah devotes numerous פסוקים to detailing the extraordinary efforts of Avraham and Sarah to host three wayfarers who passed by their tent. This contrast speaks volumes about the חשיבות of this *mitzvah* and a reminder to be נתחזק in this ענין our entire lives!

Furthermore, the Gemara in *Meseches Chagiga* (27a) writes that a table around which guests are seated is comparable to a מזבח in the בית המקדש, and the food is akin to the קרבנות that are offered to Hashem.

In *Shabbos* (127a) the Gemara notes that:

גדולה הכנסת אורחים כהשכמת בית המדרש

"Welcoming guests is as great as rising early to go to the *Beis Midrash*."

The Gemara (ibid.) continues:

גדולה הכנסת אורחים מקבלת פני השכינה

"Welcoming guests is greater than greeting the Divine Presence."

This statement is derived from the behavior of אברהם אבינו, who was standing before Hashem when he noticed guests approaching. The Gemara writes that upon seeing his guests Avraham said (*Bereishis* 18:3):

אִם־נָא מָצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אַל־נָא תַּעֲבֹר מֵעַל עַבְדֶּךָ (בראשית י״ח:ג)

"If I have found favor in your eyes, please do not pass by your servant."

As רש״י explains, אברהם was asking הקב״ה to wait while he went to take care of his guests. This is the source for the principle that גדולה הכנסת אורחים מקבלת פני השכינה, welcoming guests is greater than receiving the שכינה.

For someone who is already in the midst of taking care of his guests, the standard עוסק במצוה פטור מן המצוה, that is, one who is occupied with one *mitzvah* is exempt from another *mitzvah* (*Succah* 25a), applies. However, if one has not begun yet and is faced with a dilemma which mitzvah to prioritize, the חפץ חיים זצ״ל in his *sefer Ahavas Chessed* (3:1) rules, based on the above, that taking care of the guests supersedes praying with a *minyen* and one's fixed Torah learning sessions, provided that other household members are not around or capable to attend to the guest's needs.

In the footnote of *sefer Tefillah K'hilchaso* (8:23) they quote Rav S Z Auerbach, *zt"l*, as saying that "if leaving to *daven* will not cause the guests to feel slighted, one may go to shul and attend to the guests afterward. However, if doing so risks offending the guests or making them feel unwelcome, *hachnasas orchim* takes precedence."

The *Shulchan Aruch Harav* (*Talmud Torah* 4:4) rules that when no one else is available, even a מגיד שיעור / someone who is scheduled to be delivering a Torah class to others, must interrupt his learning to fulfill the מצוה.

Though the Rama (*OC* 333:1) writes that having your good friends with whom you enjoy socializing over for a meal does not necessarily qualify as the מצוה of *hachnasas*

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orchim, for sure if they can use the meal, respect, warmth, *chizuk*, or the spiritual nourishment that you provide, it would meet the criteria of this great *mitzvah*!

Perhaps most remarkable is the personal example of the Chofetz Chaim himself. In *Sefer Hanhagos HaChofetz Chaim* (p. 30), his son records that despite his meticulous use of time for Torah, he would devote whatever time was needed to care for his guests, even at the expense of his own learning.

People knew that they could always count on finding a hot meal in the home of the great Rav Yehoshua Leib Diskin, *zt"l*. While his guests ate, the Rav would sit nearby and continue learning. On one occasion, the Rav sat beside a poor man who had no teeth. He carefully cut the man's bread into small pieces so that he could eat it without difficulty. Later, one of his students asked him, "How did the Rav notice that the man had no teeth while he was so deeply engrossed in his learning?" Rav Yehoshua Leib replied, "Why don't you ask the same question about אברהם אבינו? While speaking with Hashem, he noticed three travelers approaching in the distance. If Avraham was so deeply immersed in his encounter with the רבונו של עולם, how did he notice them?" The Rav concluded, "The answer is that when a person truly wants to perform *chessed*, he makes sure to notice!"

Rav Shlomo Wolbe once overheard a group of students excluding a new student from an activity. He gently rebuked them, reminding them of the importance of caring for others. "The Gemara (*Shabbos* 127a) teaches that הכנסת אורחים is so great that it is comparable to receiving the פני השכינה. If welcoming a guest is so great, imagine how severe it is to exclude someone and make him feel unwanted. It is almost as though you are driving away the שכינה!"

The *Gadol Hador*, Rav Elazar Shach, *zt"l*, once shared a taxi from Bnei Brak to Yerushalayim with several bochurim who were traveling to attend a wedding of a fellow תלמיד הישיבה. During the ride, an American student who had recently joined the yeshivah mentioned that he had never been to Jerusalem before. Rav Shach immediately began pointing out notable landmarks along the way. "There is that settlement… and that is where the Arabs attacked in 1948," he explained.

The other students felt uncomfortable watching the Rosh Yeshivah, a man who never wasted a moment, serve as a tour guide. At one point, a student asked Rav Shach a question about the Gemara they were learning in yeshivah. Rav Shach gently stopped him and replied, "You can ask me questions about the Gemara whenever I am in yeshivah. Right now, my *mitzvah* is הכנסת אורחים, to make this student feel welcome and comfortable!"

My Rosh Yeshivah, Rav Dovid Soloveitchik, *zt"l*, used to say over jokingly that there was a *shayla* whether one can carry on שבת in Rav Chaim Brisker's house since it was ממש a רשות הרבים. Anybody who wanted to enter or needed a place to stay just walked right through the open door!

My Rosh Yeshivah, Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky, *shlit"a*, is renowned for the warmth and graciousness with which he greets everyone. In fact, even in the heat of summer, he turns on the air conditioning in his home only when guests arrive, ensuring their comfort! Yet, I will never forget my visit to him on July 7, 2023, while he was recovering from a stroke in a rehabilitation center.

Although I was staying an hour away, I arose before daybreak to arrive first thing in the morning. I entered his room as he was about to begin *Shemoneh Esrei* and had the *zechus* of helping him with his *siddur*, *tallis*, and *tefillin*. Afterwards, despite his physical suffering, he warmly asked about me, my family, and the kollel. When I mentioned a recent *chaburah* I had delivered, he prompted me to share the entire discussion, recalling the relevant sources along the way. His mind remained remarkably sharp.

Just then, the *gabai* brought him a bowl of applesauce. Reb Shmuel took a spoonful and then turned to me.

"Did you eat anything today?"

Here was a Rosh Yeshivah, nearly 100 years old, struggling with his own health and mobility, yet concerned about whether his much younger *talmid* had eaten breakfast! I quickly assured him that I had eaten a banana in the car, knowing he would ask.

Years earlier, I had heard a similar story from Rav Noach Orlowick, *shlit"a*. When he once visited the Kamenetsky home, Reb Shmuel immediately asked whether he had eaten breakfast and insisted on learning exactly how he liked his eggs. The Rosh Yeshivah, who had taught thousands of *talmidim*, proceeded to prepare scrambled eggs for his guest himself. "Do you like salt or pepper with your eggs?" asked Rav Shmuel!

Decades later, nothing had changed. Even while facing his own challenges, Rav Shmuel's instinct remained the same: to think about someone else.

He has plenty of needs of his own, but somehow, the needs of another person remain uppermost in his mind.

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